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On June 6, 2006, Chinese engineers demolished the last of the cofferdams protecting the primary dam that will turn the Long River (called the Yangtze by most Westerners) and its scenic Three Gorges region into a massive energy-producing lake. The government chose the foreboding date of 6-6-6 for the explosion, and was rewarded when the barrier withstood the blast wave without apocalyptic results. Water has begun to fill the reservoir, and will eventually climb 175 meters up the walls of the gorge. The initial rush of water has been stilled. Soon the rapids of the Long River will grow quiet, and the treacherous floods that have killed many peasants over the centuries will be controlled.

The Chinese government has approached the construction with remarkably thorough planning. Nobody can foresee all the consequences of such an enormous project, but beginning in 1992, commissions have investigated the ecological and social impacts in unprecedented breadth. The benefits are manifest and many: plentiful energy will spark regional and national economic development, navigation of the river will be easier, and the dangerous Long River floods will be tamed.

Commissions also looked at potential adverse effects and attempted to find solutions. The Long River Valley is home to a rich cultural and archeological heritage that will disappear forever under the rising waters. Delicate ecosystems within the river and along its banks could be damaged or wiped out. The river silt, which lays down fertile

agricultural soil and provides land for rapidly expanding Shanghai at its mouth, is in danger of being cut off. The government has made lavish expenditures to preserve the archaeological treasures of the basin. Uninvestigated sites are being rapidly explored by teams of archaeologists; architectural gems are being dismantled and moved. The twelve-story wooden pagoda at Shibaozhai will survive on its own island, created by a special dam built to preserve its beauty.

If the blast wave from the final coffer has been quelled and the river tamed, the dam has sent another wave across the whole of China, a wave of more than a million people whose homes will be engulfed by the rising waters. The government is still grappling with this problem, though not for lack of planning, and it is finding that uprooting the people and their venerable cultures is disruptive and unpredictable. The traditions of the Long River Valley survived the catastrophes of the twentieth century without deep rupture. The fall of the imperial dynasty in 1911, the Japanese invasion, the Communist makeover of culture and society, and then the Cultural Revolution washed through with great but not insurmountable losses. The only force that has proven capable of uprooting the valley folk and stripping them of their land and customs has been economic development. Having survived the twentieth century, tradition will succumb to the early twenty-first.

I. Planning the Deluge

The Long River, called the "wildest, wickedest river on Earth" by Pearl Buck, has long brought destruction to river basin residents. Hundreds of thousands have perished in its periodic floods. Rain feeds the river along its northern and southern reaches, and the lush rainy season from May to June in the south and July to August in the north extends the flood season from May to August. The major floods that periodically sweep through the valley have been disastrous. The flood of 1911 killed 100,000, while 145,000 died in 1931, and 142,000 in 1935. Under the Communist regime, a flood killed 30,000 people in 1954, while the floods of 1998 yielded an official death toll of only 4,000, but still devastated low-lying villages and towns. Few would dispute the benefits of a system of dams that will still the river waters and control its floods.

The inundation brought by the Three Gorges Dam will be slower, but ultimately it will destroy far more homes and disperse over a million people throughout China. The water will rise 175 meters in places, corresponding roughly to the 180-meter height of the dam. Much of

the flooded land will be in Sichuan Province, called the land of abundance for the crops that grace its terraced mountains and red soil. Sichuan is famous around the world for its fiery red peppers and cuisine, and in China as the cradle of several unique cultural traditions. Straddling the imaginary border that divides northern from southern China, its own borders have been stable for the last 500 years. Its steep slopes and plunging gorges make travel by land difficult, but the Long River has given the region a convenient transport route and left it open to the tides of history.

Generations of peasants have cut the slopes into arable terraces, where they grow wheat, oranges, peaches, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, and other cash crops. Corn is planted where the slopes are too steep for other crops, and valley floors have been leveled over the centuries for rice paddies. Between the lower slopes and the corn grow the orange trees, whose fragrant blooms have given Sichuan peasants a reliable and valuable crop, and a unique set of cultural traditions as well. Peasants usually put their squat homes on the lower reaches of the mountains, where water is abundant and the river accessible for fishing and other uses.

The mountainous riverbanks from Chongqinq to the dam site near Yichang are marked by white signs with the red number 175, showing the level to which the water will eventually rise. The signs run along the river valley like a baste stitch, preparing residents for the day when their old lives will be washed away. They have become accustomed to the the possibility of floods, but none so catastrophic as this, which will remove their homes, their traditions, and the centuries of work that their ancestors performed to make the land a rich agricultural base. On many hills the stitch cuts about halfway up the slope, right through the belt of orange trees. In its original plan, the central government provided land higher up the slopes for valley peasants. The law of unforeseen consequences has swept that plan aside, just as the Long River waters are sweeping aside villages and towns. Orange cultivation cannot simply be moved higher up the steep banks. The peasants who long ago chose the middle belt of the slopes for the oranges based their choice on years of experience. The oranges do not grow at high elevations or too close to the river, and they cannot take permanent root on the steep upper slopes. Only the corn grows on the upper reaches, and the peasants plant it on every square foot of the valuable land. Corn grows to within a foot of the highway in places and is planted in clay-red cuts in the rock and along plunging footpaths.

Orange trees cannot be planted on such land, and local orange cultures are fated to disappear.

Land on the upper slopes of the Long River Valley also proved highly unstable and prone to erosion. Six years into the dam project and the resettlement program the government, under the leadership of new Premier Zhu Rongji, was forced to issue new regulations to curb dangerous soil erosion. The regulations forbade farming on slopes steeper than 20 degrees, and mandated that this land be reforested. River Valley peasants could not simply be moved up the hills, nor could they be moved into the heavily farmed districts inland. They would have to be moved to other provinces, where they would be resettled, with cash awards provided by the central government and paid out by local governments.

This policy shift, unavoidable for environmental reasons but unforeseen in the original planning process, has had the most calamitous consequences for peasant resettlers. The unpleasant prospect of moving higher up the riverbanks entailed cutting new terraces, tilling new land, building new homes. But the resettlers would have remained in their homelands, the source of their individual and family identities. They would have remained within Sichuan and its traditions. Their dialect would be the local dialect, their skills would match the fields and soils around them. The deep grievances voiced by the people we found arise from being uprooted, from living among people they do not know and whose dialect they might not speak, from relying on local officials who are not responsible to them, and from finding their long-nurtured skills useless on their new land.

II. The Dispossessed Peasants

One of the ironies of the project is that Zhu, who devoted his stewardship as Premier to strengthening agriculture and improving the lives of rural residents, was forced into the decision that would disperse Sichuan peasants to distant lands. His economic leadership stabilized China during the years of the Asian financial crisis, and provided it with the financial resources that are speeding the conversion of farmland to industrial use today. There is an unmistakable trend to convert farmland to industrial and semi-industrial uses, and the process is most rapid in regions where the agricultural land is richest. Farmers who have the opportunity to hold on to good land often do not want

to, while the people who are doomed to lose their land, no matter how difficult it is to farm, cling to it desperately.

The countryside surrounding the city of Wuxi (near Nanjing), long among the most fertile lands in China, is swiftly disappearing under a forest of small machine shops, textile factories, and opulent government buildings. The wealth of the region, originally founded on its agriculture, has allowed it to leap into the boom of capitalism aggressively. Land has become more valuable for its potential business applications, and peasants gladly sell out their rights for generous compensation. Central government taxation policies designed to foster the agricultural sector actually encourage local governments to convert farmland to economic purposes. No taxes can be levied on farmland while land used for business yields a healthy 40 percent taxation rate. Local governments can charge eager entrepeneurs hefty rents. Officials in their opulent offices have every inducement to seize farmland and pay generous prices to the residents. The conversion has been so rapid that the Wuxi government has found it necessary to preserve a model village as a remnant of the disappearing life. A visit to the village reveals an old-fashioned barbershop, ancient pool halls, traditional homes with age-weathered timber ceilings—but little farming. The one farm still to be found is being converted into a highly profitable pleasure park, complete with a pavilion for musical performances, a pond, and a zoo for exotic animals like ostriches and crocodiles. The proud owner and happy city official who gave a tour of the grounds was confident of the bountiful rents and profits that would come of the project.

Long River Valley peasants are not happy to be dispossessed of their land. Their financial settlements were determined by the planning commission in 1992. This example of "foresight" has left the Long River peasants with settlements determined before the value of land shot up, and they are now unable to pay the higher contemporary prices in their new places of settlement. Officials in their home districts have no incentive to raise their settlement packages to reflect current values; and even if they did, the value of the land is depressed. Officials in their new homes have little incentive to offer resettlers land at prices commensurate with the compensation they received.

The resettlers are subject to a deep cultural alienation as well. They miss the long traditions that seeped into the soil of their Sichuan homes, the hard work of their forbearers that made the steep hills arable. They have heard the stories of neighbors who accepted resettlement and later returned to their homes illegally because of the lack of economic

opportunities in their new homes, the hostility of their new neighbors and local officials, and the sense of longing for their homeland. Resettlers to different counties in Sichuan Province, or worse, to entirely new provinces, are faceless to their neighbors and local governments. They are surrounded by people who would prefer to forget they are there, and who envy them for the large cash settlements and rich land allotments they received.

III. Finding the Resettled

Finding the resettlers is extraordinarily difficult, despite the fact that there is a central Three Gorges Resettlement Office with local offices in the larger cities of Sichuan. Government officials will not speak of them or provide names or resettlement sites. They question outsiders who come to investigate the resettlement, as if there can be no acceptable motive for visiting the migrants. Many local officials have been accused or even convicted of embezzling resettlement funds provided by the central government. The central government has executed several officials who were caught, and their cases were publicized in central press organs. Hence, suspicion of outside investigators is not surprising. Outsiders, Chinese or foreign, who persist in their investigations are often arrested under a variety of pretexts and warned not to return. The officials are unhindered by the fact that no law forbids visiting the migrants, and they seem happy to invent or creatively interpret laws to cover their actions.

Local residents are more forthcoming with information about resettlers. Many will tell an outsider where to look, but their directions are often vague or simply incorrect. In Chongqing we were told to drive north to the town of Hechuan. On arrival our search for the migrants was fruitless, until our driver remembered an old friend who might help. The friend in fact was glad to take us to the migrant settlements, but on arrival we found them unfinished and empty. We were assured that the new settlers would be arriving in "two weeks," although it was unclear how they would live in the spacious but unfinished row houses, where building was ongoing but sporadic. Our host assured us that Hechuan residents would be delighted to greet the migrants, since the town was deriving great economic benefit from them. In the two separate settlements that we visited, we were told that the migrants had been brought to Hechuan and allowed to select any parcel of land they wished. The government would buy it for them from the locals.

Our smiling host told us that they were only too willing to sell the land, because agriculture was no longer economically worthwhile in the new economy. He did not explain why the lands to be given to the resettlers in two weeks were under intense cultivation at the moment, or how the resettlers would be able to pay off the mortgages on their spacious homes through unprofitable farming. Our travels would teach us that there are many questions that must not be asked.

Our host in Hechuan was something of a local celebrity. He had a son who had died in the army's battle against the flood of 1998 and was rewarded richly by the government for his loss. He had deep reasons to applaud a project that would tame the Long River floods, and a loyalty to the government that he proved in his tour. His assurances that local residents would greet resettlers with open arms were not confirmed in other places. Sichuan peasants who moved in small clusters to other regions of China have complained bitterly of their reception and their alienation from the local culture. In the Changle District of Fujian Province (incorporated into the major city of Fuzhou) on the southern coast of China, Sichuan resettlers were disaffected and frustrated by their new environment. They did not speak the local dialect, despite the language classes that the government provided, and could not communicate with many of their neighbors. These neighbors were resentful of the fine townhouses in which they lived. In fact, their homes were spacious but poorly constructed, much as the homes we saw in Hechuan had been. The neighbors were unaware that they carried large mortgages for these homes, debts that they would not be able to repay through agricultural work. The soil of Fujian is poor, mixed with sand and clay and difficult to cultivate. The resettlers were struggling to make a living, struggling to repay their debts, struggling to find a home in this foreign land. They received little sympathy from their neighbors, most of whom could not even tell us where they lived. From our driver, a Fuzhou resident who did not hesitate to the criticize the government when he wished, they received no sympathy. Fujian natives have been leaving their homes for centuries to migrate across the world. They continue to do so, as the rows of empty houses that we saw in Fuzhou and Changle would confirm. Faced with the complaints of the resettled migrants, the driver could only respond heatedly that everybody had it just as bad.

IV. Resettling the Cities

City and townspeople can be resettled with slightly less turmoil than peasants. Cities in the valley are pitched along the steep riverbanks. Riverboat passengers arrive and look straight up to the top of a city whose roadways wind gradually upward to accommodate small-engined cars and trucks. Lined with small shops and peasants selling produce, the streets are intersected by plunging concrete stairways, which pedestrians can descend from city top to port. Although many of the mountains that loom over the river are thousands of feet high, access to the markets (and the world) occurs along the river, and much of the population lives below the 175-meter mark. For them, there is no choice but to resettle.

Resettled city residents often simply move higher up the riverbanks in the same city to newly built flats. Although their accommodations are spacious by Chinese standards, many still complain bitterly of the changes, and many of their complaints echo those of the peasants. Wanzhou, on the upper reaches of the Three Gorges, and Fengdu, a low-lying city about a hundred miles west of Wanzhou, offer a case in point about the unforeseeable consequences of planned resettlement. Fengdu is located outside the gorge region and is situated on relatively flat land on the southern bank of the river. The city will be totally submerged by the river waters, and its cultural and historical monuments will become ghosts. Only the famous Ghost City, a temple complex that has become a tourist attraction complete with a theme park, will remain. Its location on the elevation of Mingshan will become an island, which tourists will visit by boat.

Ambitious planners decided to build an entirely new city, New Fengdu, across the river from Fengdu on higher ground. The city features broad avenues thronged with automobiles, neon lights cutting into the night sky, and neighborhoods of apartment buildings with spacious flats. When officials claim that they are providing resettlers with better lives than before, they can point to the modern amenities of New Fengdu as solid proof. Stores supply the many needs of the residents, and services of all sorts are available in the shops that line the streets. New Fengdu would seem to be a model of modern urban planning.

Migrants are not hard to find in New Fengdu, and they do not hesitate to share their experiences with outsiders. Here, as in Fujian Province, when conversations turn to the subject of the resettlement,

normally calm voices rise in pitch and fill with fury, and everyone looks over their shoulders for the inevitable police presence. Conversations do not go longer than thirty minutes, beyond which the risk of an informer becomes too great. Still people talk, the older more freely than the young, since they have less to lose. Neighborhood residents gather on the open first floor of a new home, which the state has provided as space for business. They complain that economic conditions make running a store very difficult. Although the courtyard sports a bustling peasant market, the small grocery store has few customers. New Fengdu is a city of people in debt for their new homes, and the jobs promised to resettlers have failed to materialize. Few customers can afford the city-produced products in the store or the mark-up required for a decent profit. The people filling the store were idling their time away without work. The women sat in the front of the shop and embroidered. The men sat in the back smoking and playing mah jong. Their idleness confirmed what they told us about the difficulty of making a living in their new home.

V. The Means of Redress

An old man entered the store. When he heard the subject of the conversation, he erupted in a torrent of fury. He told us, as so many others had, about the settlement he had received on his old home and the need to buy his new home at present-day prices. The inflation of prices that had occurred during the decade of rapid growth had left him indebted, with no way to recover the difference. His plight was exacerbated by the large share of the resettlement that officials withheld. The old man showed us the petition that he was trying to submit to the central government. Petitions are an anachronism preserved in the present legal system that allow citizens to present their grievances directly to the central government. In a system where the judiciary is not trusted by citizens, where property rights have only recently been recognized in the socialist constitution, and where title registration has been neglected for decades, the petition is the preferred means of redress for aggrieved resettlers. Petitions are also a source of fear for local officials, in that they allow local residents to report the officials' actions to central authorities. Thus local officials seek to prevent petitioners from travelling to government centers to present their petitions. Despite the efforts of local officials and despite the rumors that only

one of a hundred petitions finds justice, petitioners beseige provincial capitals and even Beijing.

The small town of Xintian, outside of Wanzhou, offers a vivid illustration of the dislocations and unanticipated grievances that arise from the resettlement project. Xintian clings to steep hills rising up from the Long River, and looks up to towering bluffs. A 175-meter sign greets visitors along its single dirt entry road, which crosses a bridge spanning the gorge along which the town is perched. Descending the road into the town, one cannot be unaware that the old homes will soon be inundated. The homes of the town are being dismantled brick by brick, beam by beam, to leave the future inlet navigable. A new settlement of fine townhomes, with first floor business space, had been built along a single road atop the bluff, far above the future river waters. On the day of our June 3, 2006 visit, residents showed us eviction notices for June 6. The homes below them had already been dismantled and now it was their turn. Despite the impossibility of remaining, of staving off the power of the government and the waters of the Long River, many residents were determined to stay and defend their homes until they received the compensation they deserved.

The reasons they offered for their resistance were many, yet none were foreseen in the original planning process. Xintian had fallen victim to the flood of 1998, when loss of life was relatively low but property losses were great. Many low-lying homes were destroyed when floodwaters reached the town, and families had been forced to rebuild their homes with little state assistance. Many of the nicest homes in town were those restored after the flood. Property values, however, had been fixed in 1992 and did not reflect the improved values of the homes. People living in fine Xintian homes were faced with compensation far below the value, and had little ability to pay for the new homes being offered atop the bluff or elsewhere in China. An older man who had already abandoned his home was still waiting for compensation, and was forced in the meantime to live with his daughter and son-in-law in Wanzhou. When he had bought the property many years ago, which included an apartment and spaces for business, he had registered the deed in his wife's name. Under the property laws of socialist China, the deed meant little in the face of his actual possession of the home, even after his wife left him and moved away. The Three Gorges Resettlement Bureau compensates only when there is legal possession

of a property, leaving this old man without payment for his loss and no way to buy a new home.

Saddest was the fate of an old man living in a home where dismantling had begun. The old home with its weathered timbers and smoothed stone floors was a relic of another age. It was built by his grandfather and reflected the needs of that simpler time: glassless windows, oil lamps, a coal-fired wok—with the back of the house reserved for the family pig, who still lived there in his sty. In a modern China rushing towards a market economy, this structure could have little compensation value. Yet the old man was determined to stay, although the bricks of the surrounding walls were being hauled away, although the river waters would arrive, although the government would remove him forcibly. He, like the Sichuan peasants dispersed from the river valley across the whole of China, was tied to this place built by his grandfather against the face of the Long River bluffs. He felt the cutting of this long thread of tradition most deeply.

VI. Modern Planning in a Traditional Country

The Three Gorges Dam project has taken place at a time of great upheaval in rural and urban life. Economic forces have made agriculture a meager livelihood in comparison to the opportunities in private and public industry. There has been a massive migration of labor from the countryside to cities. Local and central government officials, aware of the taxes that can be reaped by conversion of agricultural land to industrial purposes, and in some cases, of the individual fortunes to be made by the illegal sale of land rights, have used and abused their powers to dispossess peasants of their land.

China, where the vast rural population has served as a source of cultural stability and has lived on the land for generations, has become a country of migrants. The Three Gorges Dam project has made involuntary migrants of river valley residents, uprooting them without any cultural buffers. Where economic forces have driven peasants from their land in other parts of China, the tumultuous process of urbanization has been softened by informal buffers. Peasants who move to the city preserve ties to their families and homelands, sending money home to kin and visiting their homes. The buffers that protect these migrants are absent in the lives of the Three Gorges resettlers, whose homes have been destroyed and who will soon have nowhere to return. The original government plan to move peasants higher up the valley

hills, above the rising waters, was upset by the unforeseen erosion. Families who thought that their new lives would take place on familiar terrain within a familiar culture—and that they could continue their traditional agricultural pursuits—find themselves scattered throughout China, often in alien lands where they have no roots, no familiar culture, and no useable economic skills.

The rigorous planning process undertaken by the Chinese government, for all its vast reach, did not account for the unforeseen impact of erosion, which sent waves of migrants throughout the country. It could not plan for cultural displacement in the way that it could provide for economic and social displacements. The government could set aside funds for transport and new housing, it could optimistically forecast that the growing economy would generate jobs for resettlers, it could create job training programs and, in extreme cases, provide language classes for settlers in distant provinces. It could not provide funds to heal alienation and uprootedness.

The planning process was rigorous, but far from perfect. Among the many unforeseen circumstances that arose after planning was completed was the rapid rise in land values and the cost of labor and building materials that made the compensation set in 1992 inadequate to the present needs of the resettlers. They arrived but were unable to pay for their new houses, and they were burdened by heavy debts that they could not repay. The problem was compounded in many places by the corruption of local officials, which deprived them of large shares of their compensation packages.

This gap in the planning process has been exacerbated by the absence of credible institutional buffers to protect resettlers treated unfairly by the government. The civil court system is relatively new in China; it came into being at about the same time as the Three Gorges planning commission. The civil courts have not established their independence from the government nor have they won the trust of citizens. Additionally, most citizens do not have the knowledge that would allow them to effectively utilize the courts. Resettlers deprived of adequate compensation have instead relied on the more traditional means of the petition. When successful, this provides direct access to the central government, but it suffers from providing arbitrary justice, and can easily be ignored or diverted by officials. The question of whether resettlers are being given the adequate compensation mandated by Chinese law is decided not by independent courts, but by the government officials whose own budgets would suffer as a consequence.

Thus the Three Gorges resettlers find themselves caught between the forces of modernization and tradition as they move to their new homes. The modern planning process that has directed the vast construction project provided for their resettlement, but did not foresee the circumstances that would make local resettlement difficult. Residents must be resettled across the whole of China, and many find themselves in communities alien to them, which are unprepared and often unwilling to receive them. The compensation that the government provided to establish new homes has proved inadequate, and there are no institutions that the resettlers can turn to for fair compensation. In a country that was already undergoing great economic, social, and cultural upheaval, they find themselves stranded by unforeseen circumstances. ◉